



Team Leadership Curriculum Development: A Descriptive Account of Employing Backward Design in a Cross-Cultural Setting

*J E Lewis¹

¹Nazarbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan

Article Info

Article history:

Received March 19, 2024

Revised August 26, 2024

Accepted August 30, 2024

Available Online August 31, 2024

Keywords:

Curriculum design;

Leadership development;

Backward design;

Central Asia;

ABSTRACT

This article presents a curriculum design aimed at enhancing team leadership skills among the student leaders of a university choir in Central Asia. The unique context revolves around a university without a fine arts program where students establish various student clubs to explore creative interests. The focus is on the university choir, led by a director who struggled initially to align with the students' preference for contemporary songs over classical repertoire. To address this challenge, a leadership team was formed, but the lack of formal training in leadership hindered their effectiveness. The curriculum design followed a backward design approach, emphasizing desired learning outcomes, including cognitive and affective domains. The design encompassed activities such as academic prompts, reflective exercises, and collaborative planning sessions spread over two sessions. Assessment involved informal checks, academic prompts, and observing behavioral changes post-workshop. The aim was to equip the leaders with practical leadership skills to improve overall team effectiveness.



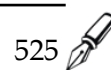
<https://doi.org/10.46627/silet>

INTRODUCTION

In a coffee shop located on the campus a university in Central Asia, five student leaders of the university choir gather to discuss activities for the upcoming year with their director. The choir started a few years ago when a group of students who wanted a choir at their new university banded together, found a director, and organized the choir. The university does not have a fine arts program, and those who enjoy expressing themselves through creative arts join or create student clubs. There are many different types of student clubs on campus such as contemporary dance, photography, vocal, ballroom dance, drumming, Korean-pop dance, and many others. The choir satisfies the desires of many who want to sing in a large group and build friendships with others who like to sing. I am their director.

During the first four months of the new choir, I struggled to connect with the students regarding musical taste and song choices for our choir. My training in choral singing and conducting was primarily with classical-style music. I found that my perspective of what a choir is to be was different than their perspectives. For me, choirs usually study and perform works in a classical style—not songs that are currently trending among pop-culture fans. The students at this university wanted to sing popular songs and not the traditional choral-style songs that I learned.

In response to this dilemma, I decided to form a leadership team of five choir members to help me with song selection and to better bridge the cultural divide in musical taste and general expectations. The leadership team has been a tremendous help to me over the years. Not only do the members of the leadership team help and advise me, but they have also become friends



and enjoy spending time together despite their rigorous academic demands. When leadership team members resign or graduate from the university, the team and I vote on who we think will be suitable replacements of the current roster of choir members.

The leadership team, under my direction, has served the needs of the choir and me well. It has served as a great opportunity for each member to explore and develop their leadership skills (Lewis, 2017). However, as I learn more about leadership, I can see that the team does not function as well as I think it can function. I believe the leadership team can learn to be a more efficient and effective team. Being more efficient and effective will not only increase their potential, but it might help them in their studies and in their roles in teams in the future. The purpose of this paper is to present a curriculum design that fills the leadership team's gap in understanding how to operate as an effective team.

My curriculum design draws on the theoretical framework of backward design as described by Wiggins and McTighe (2005). Instead of creating assignments and learning activities with a hope that the learners will gain understanding, backward design seeks to identify the desired learning outcomes and the essential questions that frame the curriculum to determine what types of assessable evidence will demonstrate that understanding has taken place (Richards, 2013). Once this has been framed, the final step is then to create relevant learning experiences. This approach to curriculum design is a goal-oriented approach that continually engages the designer/instructor in both the macro- and micro-level instructional goals (Alvarez-Llerena et al., 2023).

SIX COMPONENTS OF THE CURRICULUM

There are six major components to my curriculum. These components are the gap, the learners and their context, the objectives or desired results, the acceptable and assessable evidence, the learning activities, and the feedback loop. In the following sections I provide a description of how I address each of these components to create an effective educational experience.

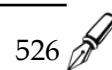
The Gap

To design a curriculum backwards, I need to begin by clearly defining a gap in the learners' understanding (McCreary, 2022). It is this gap that the curriculum should fill, and its design should focus on how to best fill, or at least seek to close, this gap. For the purposes of my curriculum, I have identified the gap in understanding as: The choir's leadership team members do not understand how to operate as an effective team (Hoch 2013). To fill this gap, it will be helpful to know about my learners' background and the context where they will apply their new understanding.

The Learners and Their Context

The learners for this curriculum are the five leadership team members of the choir I direct. These learners are university students in Central Asia who study in a university where all instruction is in English by professors who have been educated in the West. The university was established with the purpose of bringing Western higher education to the country to increase the quality of education in the country. All the students at this university, including the learners for this curriculum, have passed rigorous entrance examinations to attend the university. They are high-capacity learners and have proven themselves to be the country's academic best. The leadership team consists of four females and one male, and they range in ages from 19 to 22 years old. I have known some of them for two years and others for four years. I see them at least two times each week during the academic semester at choir rehearsals and at leadership team meetings. Furthermore, I engage with them outside of the university at various off-campus activities, through text messaging, and Email.

Each member has their strengths that I try to utilize for the benefit of the choir. One member is exceptional at dance and choreography, so she helps develop choreography for our performances. Another is experienced in drama and scriptwriting, so she helps develop storylines for our concerts. The male student is familiar with sound equipment, musical



instruments, and production needs, so he helps coordinate those aspects of our events. The fourth member is creative and likes to think of new ideas, so she helps with developing new performance concepts and marketing schemes. The final member is new to the team, and we recruited her because of her creative, yet realistic, ideas that she has offered in the past when she was not serving on the leadership team. There are many more skills and capabilities in the team, but these are just some of the many strengths present within the members of the leadership team.

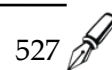
The leadership team members assist with song selection for the choir, choreograph and teach dances, find new opportunities for the choir to perform, and brainstorm various ways to keep the choir interesting for the members of the choir and for the university community. With my oversight, they have performed well in the past. However, they have no training or instruction in leadership, let alone in the specific field of team leadership. They try to work together well as a team; however, I see that our meetings, decisions, and other situations that arise can be handled more effectively or avoided altogether if they had greater understanding of what is necessary for effective team leadership.

I refer to this instructional intervention as the Team Leadership Workshop. The workshop will be divided into two separate sessions of approximately seventy-five minutes each. The second session will be one week after the first session. Having the workshop over the span of two sessions will be beneficial in at least three ways. First, the learners will know that the meetings will not be long because they will end after seventy-five minutes. I want to respect their time and busy academic schedules, so I will do my best to end on time. Second, the week between sessions will give the learners time to digest the concepts and ideas we discuss in the first session. Perhaps they will return to the second session with deeper insights, understandings, or questions that will help me determine how well they are understanding. Third, the time between sessions will allow me to evaluate my work at facilitating the workshop, and I can work to make any necessary adjustments. I plan to conduct these workshops in the coffee shop that is on the university campus. This coffee shop is where we have our leadership team meetings and is a suitable environment for this informal workshop.

After the workshop on how to function effectively as a leadership team, the learners will apply their understanding in their roles as leaders of the choir (Gould et al., 2013). My desires are that our team meetings will operate smoother, decisions will be made that relate to our common goal, and fewer problematic situations will arise. They should be able to apply their new understandings of team leadership immediately as they exercise their leadership during twice-weekly rehearsals, at formal and informal gatherings with the choir, and in their communications with me and the choir. To achieve these desires, my curriculum design for the workshop has an overarching goal and subsequent objectives that delineate the learning outcomes I desire of the workshop.

The Desired Learning Outcomes

I want the learning experience to exercise the three learning domains as described by Bloom, et al. (1956): cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. Using this approach will promote levels of learning, such as analyzing and evaluating, that are beyond rote memorization of facts. However, given the nature of the gap in understanding, it seems that I will not be able to address the psychomotor domain in this curriculum. This is because there are no physical or manual skills involved in the choir's team leadership. Additionally, I want the desired results, or objectives, of the instruction to be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time specific (SMART). SMART objectives should give the both the instructor and the learners greater clarity and structure throughout the duration of the learning experience. I designed this workshop with the overarching goal of helping the choir's leadership team members gain knowledge, attitudes, and understanding of characteristics of effective team leadership for the purpose of operating more effectively as a leadership team. I support this goal with six, smaller, more



specific objectives of the instruction in both the cognitive and affective domains (Driscoll & Wood, 2007).

To exercise the learners' cognitive domain, I developed three learning outcomes. First, I desire that the learners will be able to know and describe Larson and LaFasto's (1989) eight characteristics of effective team leadership. These eight characteristics Larson and LaFasto (1989) found are clear, elevating goal; results-driven structure; competent team members; unified commitment; collaborative climate; standards of excellence; external support and recognition; and principled leadership. Second, I want them to be able to explain common benefits and challenges of team leadership. This is one essential understanding of the workshop that will help them understand why it is important to learn about effective team leadership. A third outcome I desire is that they will be able to articulate how they might demonstrate the eight characteristics of effective team leadership in their context with hypothetical or real-world examples. This is a second essential understanding because they will understand how to apply the theoretical findings in their unique context (Kastur et al., 2020). By the end of this workshop, it is my desire that the learners will better understand team leadership theory, as described by Larson and LaFasto (1989), and develop transferability so they can apply the cognitive understandings to various leadership situations (Okunola, 2023).

I also desire that this workshop will also engage their affective learning process with three learning outcomes. First, I desire they will be able to tell why they would or would not choose to implement characteristics of effective team leadership. Second, I desire that they will be able to present the strengths and weaknesses of their own contributions to the choir's leadership team. This is a third essential understanding to help them develop their personal contributions to team. And third, I want them to propose ways how they can operate more effectively as a team by share concrete suggestions of change. I designed these objectives to be SMART objectives that frame the instructional experiences to close the gap described above. To evaluate if the learners understood well, I need proper assessment criteria.

Acceptable Evidence that is Assessable

This workshop is not a formal class where I assign grades or scores based on the course assignments. The learners will not need to pass tests, quizzes, or a written assessment; however, it is my goal that they learn about effective team leadership and have the capability to use their new understandings in their roles on the leadership team. Therefore, as the instructor, I need to be able to assess whether each of the five members is gaining understanding and if they can transfer their understanding to their respective roles on the leadership team.

To be able to assess their level of understanding, I will conduct informal checks throughout the duration of the learning experience. I will do this by observing responses, monitoring dialogues, and engaging in conversations with the learners. These checks will inform me regarding how well the learners are understanding the ideas. If I notice that one or more learners are not understanding, I will seek to properly address the lack of understanding.

I will ask the learners to engage in academic prompts and simulated performance tasks. I provide these prompts and performance tasks in the section below. In these tasks, the learners will 1) present their understandings of the eight characteristics, 2) describe the known benefits and challenges to team leadership, 3) give some examples of each characteristic of effective team leadership, 4) defend their position on why they would or would not implement the characteristics, 5) describe the strengths and weaknesses of their own contributions to team leadership, and 6) develop a plan for how they can operate more effectively as a team. I will be able to assess their understandings in these areas through how they respond to the prompts and engage in the simulations. If a learner is not understanding, I will work to help them understand.

In the weeks and months after the workshop, I will be able to see their actions and behaviors in their roles on the leadership team. I will observe how decisions will be made, if the

focus of their decisions work toward the goal of the choir, and how they address challenging situations. Observing them after the conclusion of the workshop will provide evidence to me on how well they understand and implement the learning outcomes (Setiani et al., 2020).

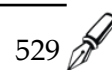
The Learning Activities

According to Wiggins and McTighe (2005), developing the learning activities is where many educators erroneously start the curriculum design process. They argue that creating activities without having first articulated the desired learning outcomes will cause the designer to create activities that are, at best, moderately relevant to the ultimate purpose of the instruction. They suggest a better practice is to work backwards from the identified outcomes toward the learning activities to create activities that seek to fulfil the desired outcomes. In this section, I provide an outline of the learning activities that prepare the learners to demonstrate acceptable evidence of the learning outcomes that is assessable. I designed my curriculum with seven learning activities and experiences to guide the learners into understanding how to function as a leadership team more effectively.

First, I will begin with an academic prompt activity to challenge the learners to think about what is necessary for team leadership to be effective (Northouse, 2016). I will ask, “You have been working together as a leadership team for some time now. You have had different situations arise and you have learned some things about working as a team. I want you to think about what makes our team work best. Please finish this sentence with as many characteristics as you can: ‘Some characteristics of effective team leadership are...’.” I will give them a couple minutes to think of responses and write them down on their paper. After completing this, I will ask the learners to say out loud what they wrote. As they do this, I will make notes of all the characteristics mentioned and then compare them to Larson and LaFasto’s (1989) eight characteristics found in their study. If there are some differences, I will ask the learners to explain why or why not they think the differences contribute to effective team leadership. I anticipate we will have most of the eight characteristics as Larson & LaFasto (1989), however it will not be problematic if there are fewer. After they provide their responses, I will briefly explain Larson and LaFasto’s (1989) study and findings, and I will ask them if they agree. Time permitting, we can discuss why or why not they agree with Larson and LaFasto’s (1989) findings. The total time for this activity should be twenty to thirty minutes.

The second activity is a follow-up to the first. In the second activity, I will ask the learners individually to describe and explain at least one characteristic. I will say, “Now choose one or two characteristics to talk about. Explain why it contributes to effective team leadership and provide some examples. Don’t choose a characteristic that has already been chosen.” This activity will help each person think in depth about at least one characteristic that contributes to effective team leadership. Furthermore, all learners will hear descriptions of the characteristic and practical examples. I will encourage comments, thoughts, and other examples from the other learners, and I will guide the activity by providing feedback and comments. This activity may take twenty to thirty minutes.

For the third activity, I want the learners to discuss the benefits and challenges of team leadership. I will say, “As you know from experience, there are benefits and challenges to being a leader, and the same is true in team leadership. Think of some reasons why having team leadership is beneficial or helpful and think of some problems or drawback to having team leadership.” This activity will help the learners recognize how team leadership is helpful for the choir, and what problems or inefficiencies occur because of team leadership. This activity will help them to understand the strengths and weaknesses of team leadership. I will ask them, “Why is it good to know your/our strengths and weaknesses?” to help them understand that learning about strengths and weaknesses can help us all become more effective. I want to make sure they know that it is important to promote everyone’s strengths and provide helpful support in areas of weakness. This activity will last approximately ten minutes.



To help the learners examine their values regarding team leadership, the fourth activity will challenge them to think of why they would or would not choose to implement each of the characteristics of effective team leadership. I will ask them to divide into two groups. In their groups, I will ask them to discuss why they would or would not choose to implement each of the characteristics of effective team leadership. This activity will engage their affective domain by working to extract their values. I believe they are more willing to share more among their peers and then with me, their director. I will encourage the groups to think critically about each person's response (Fadilah et al., 2020) and ask constructive questions to challenge the learners to provide substantial reasons for why they would or would not choose to implement each of the characteristics. I anticipate this activity might take approximately fifteen to twenty minutes.

I want the fifth activity to be a reflective activity where the learners evaluate themselves (Colomer, et al, 2020). For this activity, I will ask the learners to reflect on their own contributions to the choir's leadership team as they keep the characteristics of effective team leadership in mind. Then, I will ask them to make two columns on a piece of paper—one column labeled "What I Do Well" and the other labeled "What I Can Improve." I will give them time to reflect on their time serving on the leadership team, to think through the characteristics of effective team leadership, and to write down as many strengths and weaknesses as possible. At the end, I will ask volunteers to share what they learned from this activity. I think they will be comfortable sharing in the small group of only the leadership team. If I notice that they are hesitant to share, I may share some of what I learned. This activity will encourage the learners to know their strengths and utilize those strengths as well as find potential weak areas in their involvement with the leadership team as compared to effective team leadership. Furthermore, this exercise will help me know what each of them see as their strengths and weaknesses so I can know how to better work with each member. I anticipate this activity will take fifteen to twenty minutes.

The purpose of the last two activities is to apply their new understandings to their roles in the choir's leadership team. In the sixth activity, I will ask the learners to think of how they can operate more effectively as a team. I want to focus this activity on solidifying realistic goals for how the team can improve. I will ask for input from everyone and have them explain why they think their suggestion is a valuable suggestion. I will evaluate each suggestion and write each one down. This activity should last approximately ten minutes.

The final activity will be a collaborative effort. The team will work together to develop a step-by-step plan for how the leadership team can be more effective. I will facilitate the collaboration by writing the steps and descriptions on a large piece of paper. We will begin by first listing the changes we want to see. Second, we will discuss each change and how each change can occur. Third, we will prioritize the changes into steps. This will give us an order of what needs to happen first, second, and so on. I want this activity to be collaborative so that all learners come to some agreement on, and have input regarding, the changes they desire and on the order of their priority. The activity might take approximately forty-five minutes and should end with a solid plan on which everyone agrees regarding how to become a more effective leadership team.

These seven learning activities will occur over the period of two sessions. I plan to do the first four in the first session and the final three in the second session. These learning activities should prepare the learners to demonstrate acceptable evidence of the learning outcomes that is assessable. As with any instruction, I plan to make any necessary changes during the workshop to help facilitate learning and understanding.

Feedback Loop

Feedback is important to understand how well learning outcomes were achieved and inform the curriculum designer with how to improve the learning outcomes and better understand the learners and context. During the learning sessions, I will observe and evaluate their

involvement in the activities, their responses, and their input. These instructional observations will help me determine how well the learners are understanding. Afterward, I will observe the leadership team's behaviors, interactions, and progress toward becoming a more effective leadership team. The criteria I will look for will include the characteristics of effective team leadership that were identified. At future team meetings, I will take a few minutes to ask the team, "How do you think we are doing with being an effective leadership team?" This will give me feedback, but it will also remind them of what they learned in the workshop. These are the ways I intend to acquire feedback about the effectiveness of the workshop.

CONCLUSION

The curriculum I designed is for a non-formal educational setting. The learners are university students who are active as leaders in an extra-curricular student club organization—the university student choir. They choose voluntarily to participate in the club and demonstrate a solid commitment to the club and its success. One of the reasons that all the learners were selected to be on the leadership team is because of their involvement in and dedication to the club. However, they have never experienced training or instruction in how to be leaders.

I designed this curriculum to fill the gap they have in understanding team leadership. While they are growing and learning with on-the-job training, I believe they will all benefit from gaining a better understanding of team leadership through a guided instructional workshop based on scholarly theory. The understandings they acquire should manifest through operating as a more effective leadership team. I will challenge them to think through how to operate more effectively, develop a realistic action plan, and implement the plan. I will involve myself through every step guiding them into being a more effective team.

REFERENCES

- Alvarez-Llerena, C. L., dos Santos, J. C., Sacoto, D. E. V., & Balbuca, J. M. V. (2023). Exploring the application of the Backward Design Model in EFL classrooms: Teachers' perceptions and practices. *Research, Society and Development*, 12(4), e14912441102. <https://doi.org/10.33448/rsd-v12i4.41102>
- Bloom, B. S. (Ed.). Engelhart, M. D., Furst, E. J., Hill, W. H., & Krathwohl, D. R. (1956). *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook I: The Cognitive Domain*. New York: David McKay Co. Inc.
- Colomer, J., Serra, T., Cañabate, D., & Bubnys, R. (2020). Reflective learning in higher education: Active methodologies for transformative practices. *Sustainability*, 12(9), 3827. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/su12093827>
- Driscoll, A., & Wood, S. (2007). *Developing outcomes-based assessment for learner-centered education: A faculty introduction*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Fadilah, S., Jatmiko, B., & Prastowo, T. (2020). Validity and effectiveness of argument-driven inquiry model with contextual approaches to improve critical thinking skills in science learning. *Studies in Learning and Teaching*, 1(2), 66–75. <https://doi.org/10.46627/silet.v1i2.32>
- Hoch, J. (2013). Shared leadership and innovation: The role of vertical leadership and employee integrity. *Journal of Business & Psychology*, 28(2), 159-174. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10869-012-9273-6>
- Gould, D., Voelker, D. K., & Griffes, K. (2013). Best coaching practices for developing team captains. *Sport Psychologist*, 27(1), 13-26. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1123/tsp.27.1.13>
- Kastur, A., Mustaji, M., & Riyanto, Y. (2020). The practicality and effectiveness of direct learning model by using life-based learning approach. *Studies in Learning and Teaching*, 1(3), 165-174. <https://doi.org/10.46627/silet.v1i3.50>
- Larson, C. E., & LaFasto, F. M. J. (1989). *Teamwork: What must go right, what can go wrong*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

- Lewis, J. E. (2017). Cross-cultural leader development in a university club: An Autoethnography. *Educational Process: International Journal*, 6(3), 7-17. <http://dx.doi.org/10.22521/edupij.2017.63.1>
- McCreary, M. (2022). Beyond backward design, or, by the end of this article, you should be able to imagine some alternatives to learning objectives. *To Improve the Academy: A Journal of Educational Development*, 41(1), 68-91. <https://doi.org/10.3998/tia.454>
- Northouse, P. G. (2016). *Leadership: Theory and practice* (7th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Okunlola, J. O. (2023). Learning transfer in the workplace: an insight into the missing link in the education and training of employees. *Studies in Learning and Teaching*, 4(2), 349-354. <https://doi.org/10.46627/silet.v4i2.241>
- Richards, J. C. (2013). Curriculum approaches in language teaching: Forward, central, and backward design. *RELC Journal*, 44(1), 5-33. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0033688212473293>
- Setiani, R., Widuroyekti, B., Tresnaningsih, S., Sambada, D., Setyowati, T., Rohman, A., & Harnoto, B. T. (2020). The Effectiveness of the Student Activity Sheet (SAS) on Teaching-Learning and Creativity (TLC) Model to Increase Creativity Competence. *Studies in Learning and Teaching*, 1(3), 175-184. <https://doi.org/10.46627/silet.v1i3.36>
- Wiggins, G. & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by design* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Curriculum Development.

Author (s):

*Jason E. Lewis (Corresponding Author)
Nazarbayev University
Astana, Kazakhstan
Email: jason.lewis@nu.edu.kz

